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ABSTRACT

The current state of disarray in mass communication research can be cleared up by the orderly application of more careful media research procedures. Semiotics and structural analysis promise some advances in media studies, but these methods are limited when applied to peculiar qualities of time in film and television. A more fruitful approach includes a consideration of existential and experiential media phenomena. If existential phenomena (light, space, time, motion, and sound) are juxtaposed with the experiential (the instantaneousness and irrevocability of "media moments," the irreducibility of experience, and media event context), it is possible to begin to make deeper, meaningful observations about the basic theory of various forms of media. The details of this approach remain to be developed. (CH)

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

A Paper Delivered at the Convention of the
Western Speech Communication Association

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Considering the immensity of the topic, "New Directions in Mass Communication Research," the time limit of twenty minutes is quite severe. But let us look at this delimitation positively: it makes the usual introductory niceties unnecessary, encourages me to be selective, and permits me to be less than exhaustive in my treatment of the selected topic.

We have all heard the usual, and by now traditional, complaints about the past and present methods and techniques of mass communication research: the qualitative researchers are said to be merely guessing, the quantitative ones simply counting. Qualitative research is said to be too descriptive, too difficult to quantify and, therefore, considered generally unreliable. Quantitative mass communication research all-too-often results in the familiar "no-significant-difference," at least at the .01, or even on the .05 level. And, to the horror of the conscientious mass communication researcher, much of his work is generally ignored or misused by the practicioner. The practitioners either don't know what is available or how to get a hold of it (ERIC who?), or they mistrust research results a priori, regardless of the relative quality of the studies themselves. Worse, there are those who know of the power of the word "research," especially in the circle of the uninitiated, and who select only such studies that are congruent with their initial opinions, opinions firmly established by prejudice and

solidly verified by selective perception. Finally, there is the practitioner who makes a conscientious effort to locate studies that may help him in his creative task, only to discover that he does not know how to interpret the research results or how to fit them properly into his decision-making process.

The major exception to this seemingly dismal state of affairs is the apparent success of the opinion poll or broadcast rating. Such surveys are usually looked down upon, or even chastised, by the sophisticated experimental researcher. As the critics point out, such surveys may be able to count contact, but not impact. But why, then, are such surveys still being done? More so, why do they carry so much weight and often decide over which program should survive and which should not?

On the other hand, why are the actual creative decisions as to program type, format, and production treatment almost always based more upon the practical experience or intuitive hunches of the broadcast practitioner rather than on rigorous experimental research?

These questions have, of course, been asked and answered in a variety of ways many times before. I ask them again not so much to find universally true answers, but becuase of the probability that, when searching for appropriate answers, we might be led inadvertendly into new directions in mass communication research.

Even by looking at the above problems impressionistically, we can isolate trends and identify focal points which deserve

furtner comment and investigation.

Some research, such as opinion polls, reader surveyes, or radio and television ratings, prove important to the practicioner, in spite of the disarmingly simply approach to the problem. These studies apparently supply information for which there is a genuine need. At least they are more direct, more extant, than our more sophisticated experimental research. Perhaps we have not always been asking the right questions; perhaps we are neglecting problem areas that, at first sight, do not look too promising for, or worthy of, careful investigation. Perhaps the problem might appear too complicated for the researcher's available budget, time, or research tools. Or, as it occasionally happens, the researcher may take on only such problems that conveniently fit his existing research designs, rather than trying to make the design fit the problem.

Quantitative and qualitative research tend to be classified as mutually exclusive operational fields, whereby the one camp often views the other with professional suspicion, sometimes with scholarly distrust, and occasionally even with ordinary disdain. But this type of reductionism is not simply an expression of harmless scholarly competition. Rather, it is an expression of narrow-mindedness that often prevents us from pooling ideas and synthesizing partial theories, methods, and techniques into common, synergistic models. And we need desperately such synergistic models that can adequately cope with the typical factorial makeup of even a simple communication problem: complex, contextually interdependent connections among message, medium, and percipient, which resist or often defy accurate, mutually exclusive, categorization and analysis.[1]

Here, then, are three directions that emerge from this quick overview and which deserve closer attention:

(1) The Problem. What areas of mass communication need to be searched and re-searched?

(2) The Method. How can we best study the identified problem? What ways are available to us? Which new methods and techniques do we need to make the tools fit the task?

(3) The Application. How can we help the practicioner interpret our research results and use them as a major factor in his decision-making process?

Let me briefly develop the first two points: problem and method.

THE PROBLEM

Despite the impressive, ever-increasing amount of mass communication studies, there are still problem areas that have received little or no attention, or that need to be re-examined. I am not advocating needless or wasteful duplication of studies. As we all know, too many studies are done over and over again, not so much to check the validity of the study, or to verify the reliability of a theoretical model, as to use research as a convenient method of persuasion. We all remember the many studies of the relative effectiveness of the classroom teacher versus the television teacher. We also know that most of these studies were done in order to persuade someone in administration to keep up with the Jones's and to get a closed-circuit television system for the school, regardless of actual need.

On the other hand, there are the studies on television violence. All the massive research in this area tells us is

that sometimes, under some circumstances, some viewers have scored higher on some aggression scale than some others. After 139 pages of impressive testimony, Feshbach and Singer, for example, came to the "modest conclusion...that exposure to aggressive content in television over a six-week period does not produce an increment in aggressive behavior."[2]

Should we stop at this point? Of course not. But we must probably look in a different direction, or use more precise measuring tools. Perhaps we should shift our vantage point, look through the telescope backwards so that we can see more of the problem, the problem in its wider context. What exactly do we mean by television violence? Violent acts which are "portrayed" on television and distributed via television?[3] Or might it be the relationship between viewer attitude and believability of screen image that may turn into a violent one, or even induce the viewer to immediate or delayed violent acts? For example, watching the good guy slugging it out with the bad guy might trigger an immediate viewer reaction that is far from violent, but may even prove refreshingly cathartic. But the innocent, persistent, insidious display of unattainable wealth as the common living standard might lead the poor to a level of frustration that they may well release in violent acts. Someone who doesn't have enough money to buy a sufficient amount of even the simplest kind of food for his hungry family might get quite angry at the attractive screen display of gourmet food and drink. Someone who is trapped in a slum area might well get angry, if not violent, if he is continuously refused the good life which he has learned from television to be the norm.

As far as the message is concerned, an objective content analysis would probably assign the fight scene a higher aggression score than the scene in which elegant people wine and dine elegantly in elegant surroundings. Even if we were to do a controlled experiment with the typical psychology freshmen randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups, we would probably score the fight scene as significantly higher on an aggression index than the dining scene. Yet, as mentioned above, if we shift our point of view and analyze the problem within a wider context, we would probably find that the subtle accumulative effect of reinforcing unattainable models of the good life actually is the more violence-prone program fare than the fight scene. Here is an important discinction. We are no longer concerned with the effect of a message as portrayed on and distributed by television, but with the medium-structured, medium-transcended message. We are concerned with the empathetic harmonics between the moving image on the television screen and the moving image within the viewer. From this perspective, the medium is no longer a neutral factor which we may or may not want to control as a variable, but a basic and essential structuring element in the communication process.

Unfortunately, the medium itself is often neglected in mass communication research. Although McLuhan's overstatement of the medium being the message, or even the massage, has by now successfully infiltrated the cocktail circuit of the advertiser and politician, it still seems to have eluded the attention of many a mass communication researcher.

Even in the recent, and fairly extensive, Handbook of Communication the medium is significantly missing.[4]

For me, the proper study of the medium is an essential pre- or co-requisite to the study of the medium effect. More so than the message itself. After all, we should not be content with measuring the television-mediated message ex post facto. Rather, we should shift our attention to the transformation process of message into medium experience so that we can learn how to make accurate predictions as to specific and general, immediate and delayed, medium effects. If we had more valid, reliable, and accessible medium research results, the practicioner would perhaps no longer rely primarily on more or less educated guessing. Rather, he would have some viable means by which to assess program format and aesthetic program structure before the program has reached its intended audience. This is what I mean by making research more relevant, more extant, more applicable to the real need than it presently is.

The whole area of production research, the study of how an idea moves and changes through the various stages until it is sublimated into the viewer experience must become a prime target for mass communication research, especially since production never quite fit the well-established, reverend canons of traditional mass communication research.

METHOD

Once we move about new research territories, such as production, we have to re-examine whether or not our research tools still fit the task.

Chikio Hayashi from The Institute of Statistical Mathematics, Tokyo, speaks of "hard" and "soft" results and approaches in methodology. The hard result is purely mathematical and based on tight logic; the soft result is achieved by a more free-wheeling process of looking at phenomena, a "thinking behind the analysis of phenomena."[5] Both are necessary. Through the soft approach we intuit a problem, analyze it contextually, search for new relationships among the event elements, and prepare the problem properly for statistical analysis. Through the hard approach, we can test the problem's predictability. Ignoring either one does not help to make the method more efficient, but simply more myopic. Let me just cite one example.

There is a recent study on background color and legibility.[6] The researcher projected a number of variously colored slides with the same random black letters on them. The problem was to find what background color would make the written message most legible. After an impressively thorough hard approach the researcher comes to the startling conclusion that the white background made the letters most legible. The researcher is somewhat puzzled by this result, especially since he was very careful to match the brightness contrast between letters and all background colors. Since the white background, for example, measured the same transmitted brightness as the green or yellow one, he thought that he had controlled the variable of brightness and, therefore, was concentrating on hue only. This method is impeccable from a hard point of view. From a soft point of view, however, other powerful aesthetic variables go unchecked.

We all know that we employ constancies in order to keep our environment perceptually manageable. We perceive similar chairs as similar in size, although the one closer to us produces a larger proximal stimulus, a larger actual retinal image, than the one farther away. So it is with brightness. A white sheet of paper in a deep shadow still appears brighter to us than charcoal in sunlight, even though the coal might actually measure quite a bit higher on the brightness scale than the paper. Could this constancy phenomenon have played a part in the color background study? Since we know that white is brighter than green, we perceive the contrast between black letters and white background as higher than that of letter and the green background, regardless of the actual reflectance values. Such perceptual phenomena are, of course, difficult to measure, at least with the presently available methods.[7] The available tools obviously no longer fit the task. What we need is a rethinking of mass communication research, a concern with method that stresses both, the hard and soft approaches. We can no longer afford ignoring prominent psychological phenomena and aesthetic factors, simply because they haven't as yet been sanctioned by a hard numerical statistic.

What we need is a Gestalt approach to research. By Gestalt approach I mean that we must develop methods and techniques that allow us to observe an event or event factor within rather than without its contextual pattern, its dynamic structural field.[8] For example, a single note behaves quite differently when played in isolation than when perceived as part of a chord. If we now separated each note of a triad and examined it in

isolation, we would certainly misconstrue the structural function of each note and would consequently be quite misled as to the true perceptual Gestalt impact of the triad.

By trying to observe certain phenomena within their structural context, we will run less the risk of erroneously confusing a necessary, but reversible, connection between two event factors with an irreversible cause-effect relationship. The failure of so many studies to show a significant cause-effect relationship may not mean that there is no difference between one element and another, or between the behavior of one event and another, but merely that the difference might be a topological one (a change in emphasis of connecting elements) and not a structural one (a change in basic connections).

How do we formulate such a Gestalt approach? There is no single or simple answer. We all have to begin working on this task. Here are two possibilities: (1) develop workable theoretical models; and (2) refine and apply vector theory.

Theoretical Models. In our quest to combine hard and soft methodologies, we might do well to begin working from the top down rather than from the bottom up. We just have to dare the intuitive leap that is so important in theory building and must search for new interconnections, new patterns, new dynamic structures that can cope adequately with the complexity of mass communication events. We have to become more mobile and flexible in our approach. In mass communication, as in life itself, change seems to be the only stable factor.

The rediscovery of semiotics[9] (the basic semiotic models

had been proposed and immediately ignored over thiry years ago), and the merging prominence of structuralism[10] are healthy signs. But again, both disciplines are deeply rooted in linguistics, a field that once again works with records of the past rather than the living moment of the present, as we experience in television for example. The numerous attempts of adapting information theory into cybernetic[11] and even aesthetic[12] systems have been extremely valuable in the combining of hard and soft methods of research. Yet they, too, have failed to provide a model that could effectively deal with the contextual complexity of aesthetic media factors and their structural metamorphosis in production.

What we need to do is to sit back and re-examine the available hard data in the more relaxed atmosphere of the soft environment. The various formulations of taxonomies are, in my opinion, a step in the right direction.[13] Personally, I have been concentrating on a field of inquiry that I call mediakinetology, the study of moving media images.

Briefly, the mediakinetological field contains existential and experiential aesthetic media phenomena. Existential phenomena are media factors such as light, space, time, motion, and sound. The experiential phenomena are the instantaneousness and irrevocability of the moment, the complexity and irreducibility of experience, and event context and perspective. I have translated the existential media factors into aesthetic vectors, forces with a direction and magnitude, and juxtaposed them with the experiential field, which, once again, could well be in-

terpreted as aesthetic energy or vector events. Through the vector translation, I now have a method by which I can detect the various interconnections among the existential media factors themselves, and between the existential and experiential phenomena. The vector theory allows me not only to define precisely and possibly measure aesthetic energy as operating in the media, such as television, but it also may very well facilitate the detection or structuring of new interconnections, new production methods and their cumulative, holistic effects. As vectors, the external and internal aesthetic energies can be made to yield to quantification, and hopefully, to precise measurement. Some of these interconnections between the existential and experiential phenomena are described in more detail in my Sight, Sound, Motion.[14]

APPLICATION

I believe that the Gestalt approach to mass communication research might just give the practicioner what he really needs. But we still have two problems to overcome: (1) to interpret the research data in such a way that the practitioner can apply them directly to his actual tasks, and (2) to make the translated data readily available.

But these problems I shall take up at another time.

NOTES

1. Sayre, K.M.,"Philosophy and Cybernetics," Philosophy and Cybernetics. Ed. by Frederick J. Crosson and Kenneth M. Sayre. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967, pp. 3-33.

2. Feshbach, Seymour and Singer, Robert D. Television and Aggression. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers, 1971, p. 140.

3. Ibid., p. xi.

4. Pool, I. de Sola, and Schramm W. (eds.) Handbook of Communication. Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Co., 1973.

5. Hayashi, Chikio, "Methodological Problems in Mass Communication Research," Studies in Broadcasting, ed. by H. Eguchi and K. Sata. NHK: The Theoretical Research Center, The Radio and TV Culture Research Institute, 1973, pp. 121-151.

6. Snowberg, Richard L, "Bases for the Selection of Background Colors for Transparencies," AV Communication Review, 21 (Summer 1973), pp. 191-207.

7. An attempt has been made to measure our perception of a Gestalt by K.M. Sayre, " Toward a Quantitative Model of Pattern Formation," Philosophy and Cybernetics, pp. 137-179.

8. Compare the field theory of Kurt Lewin, especially in his A Dynamic Theory of Personality. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1935.

9. See the 1973 Spring/Summer issue of The Journal of the Society for Education in Film and Television, which deals extensively with the cinema semiotics and the work of Christian Metz.

10. Lane, Michael. Introduction to Structuralism. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970.

11. Pierce, J. R. Symbols, Signals and Noise. New York: Harper Torchbook, 1961. Also see Crosson and Sayre, Philosophy and Cybernetics.

12. Moles, Abraham. Information Theory and Esthetic Perception. Tr. by Joel E. Cohen. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968.

13. Moore, Maxine R.,"The Perceptual-Motor Domain and a Proposed Taxonomy of Perception," AV Communication Review, 18 (Winter 1970), pp. 379-413.

14. Zettl, Herbert. Sight,Sound,Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics. Belmont:: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc, 1973.